

‘You’re moving,’ Marijam whispered as she put her hand over her stomach. Gabrizan’s child was moving. So this had been the right thing to do.

The noise of the machinery grew louder. Marijam could also hear people’s voices. Her heart started crashing into her ribs now.

‘Sorry, baby,’ she muttered. ‘I don’t want to scare you, but I’m terrified.’

Marijam heard a sudden movement at the side of her.

‘Hey, what’s this then?’ a gritty voice rasped.

A gloomy figure stepped into Marijam’s path. The smell was the worst. She found it hard not to vomit again. This was what the unwashed must smell like, something she had never experienced before.

‘What do you want, then, little rich girl?’ snarled the man, wiping his hand on the dirty torn tunic.

A second figure came forward out of the shadows. This time it was a younger man. He was just as dirty as the first, and his brown tunic was made of the same rough looking material. But he didn’t seem to smell quite so much. His face looked a bit kinder too.

Marijam could not move. She wanted to run, but she could not get her legs to do what she asked them. Even if they had moved, she knew she would not be able to get far. She was too tired.

‘Well?’ asked the first man, grabbing Marijam’s arm so hard that she could already feel the bruise forming. ‘Why have you come here? Running away from something are you?’

‘Look, I’ve got some things you can have,’ stammered Marijam, pointing to her bag which was beginning to slip from her shoulders, ‘if you’ll let me stay.’

‘Go on then, get it open!’ shouted the first man, pulling the bag away from her and gesturing to the younger man.

The younger man took the bag and began to empty its contents on to the cave floor.

‘You won’t be needing those here,’ commented the older man, as the younger one piled up the few tunics she had brought with her.

‘No, you’ll be much too cold,’ said the younger man more kindly.

‘That’ll do!’ cried the other man. He snatched the jewellery box.

‘Hey, wait a minute, Franck!’ cried the younger man. ‘Take a look at this.’ He was holding the picture book. His rough hands were thumbing through the pictures.

‘My God!’ replied Franck. He also now started pawing at the book. ‘Does this mean...?’

The younger man nodded.

Marijam wanted to scream out to him to be careful. How dare such a brute touch her precious book.

Franck’s face was white and there were now beads of sweat on his forehead.

‘Do you really think this can have happened to us?’ asked the younger man.

Marijam didn’t have time to think what this might all be about. The two men quickly bundled her things back into her bag.

‘Ianus, we’ll have to get her to the wise woman,’ hissed Franck.

‘Well, we’d better get a kartje,’ replied Ianus. ‘We can’t risk anything happening to her. She looks exhausted already. We can’t expect her to walk any further.’

‘Right,’ said Franck. ‘You sit down there, Miss. Ianus will be back soon.’

The smell was still quite disgusting, but Marijam felt a bit more comfortable now. They seemed to think she was something special. Goodness knows what that was all about, but it was helping. And she was tired. Oh, so very tired. She closed her eyes. She could hear Franck breathing, but he didn’t seem inclined to say anything. When she opened her eyes again, he was staring at her and frowning slightly.

Ianus came back a few minutes later. Then Marijam realised what a kartje was. It was something from the last century. A type of small cart which hovered a few inches off the ground. She didn't think there were any of those left. And she thought they had been called carrels. But then, this was the Z Zone. Anything could happen.

Ianus helped her into the small vehicle.

'You'll still have to hold on,' he warned. 'It can only keep about twenty centimetres off the ground, so it still goes up and down a bit'

Franck climbed in behind them with her bag. Ianus moved the controls, and soon they were rushing forward a little above the ground. There were some uncomfortable twists and turns and quite a few jolts where the ground suddenly dipped away or rose up.

Occasionally they passed groups of people who were working with their hands or on old pieces of machinery. They all wore the rough-looking tunics and had the same leathery skin. Some of them stopped their work and stared at Marijam.

'Watch out! We're on important business,' Franck would call.

Ianus frowned at him.

'We ought to keep quiet about her really,' he said. 'Make out that she's nothing special. See what the old one says first.'

Marijam was beginning to feel very sleepy. This place was cold and uncomfortable. The people looked rough and it was clear that life was very hard for them. She wouldn't have chosen to live here if she'd really had any choice. The thought of giving birth actually terrified her. If only she could have told her parents what had happened, or, better still, Gabrizan.

But she was beginning to feel safe. These two rough men seemed to accept her, seemed to have been waiting for her, almost. She had no idea why they thought she was important. But whatever it was, it was just helping her to be accepted and she thought she ought to be grateful.

The kartje stopped in front of a doorway which seemed to lead into a natural cave.

'Old woman!' called Ianus.

The door of the cave opened slowly. A woman stood in the frame. Her silver hair hung loosely over her tunic, almost reaching her waist. She peered at Marijam, a slight frown on her forehead.

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘So you’re here. I see you have the Book. At last. Come, we have been expecting you.’

The old lady’s eyes pierced into hers. Marijam wanted to run away. But she knew that all she could do was follow the woman slowly towards the door. Ianus and Franck went to follow her. The old woman put out her hand up to stop them and shook her head. Ianus handed her Marijam’s bag.

Marijam shivered. But this time it was excitement, not fear.